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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 7761  
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1889  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1444  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 3716  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4952  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005332

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SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL UPDATE: ELECTION CLOCK TICKING

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Publication of key laws sets a January 2008 drop-dead date for the House elections, while Election Commission officials maintain the election will be on December 23.... A debate on ethics in the legislature focuses on alleged improprieties by Prime Minister Surayud.... Most new political parties appear in a state of disorder, and politicians do not need to commit to a particular party until 30 days before the House election.... Legislators dropped efforts to strengthen lese majeste provisions after a signal of disapproval from the Palace. End Summary.

ELECTION CLOCK TICKING

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¶2. (C) The Election Law, Political Party Law, and Election Commission (EC) Law were published in the Royal Gazette on October 8 and thereby took effect the following day. According to the 2007 Constitution, the House of Representatives election must be held within 90 days of the laws coming into force, meaning that the second week in January 2008 marks the drop-dead date. An Election Commissioner confirmed to us on October 10 that the EC had already forwarded to the cabinet a draft Royal Decree that would establish December 23 as the election date; he expected the cabinet to approve the decree at its October 16 meeting. The next step would be for the Council of State to screen the draft before forwarding it to the Cabinet Secretariat for submission to the King. Our EC contact expected the final step -- publication in the Royal Gazette -- no later than the end of October, locking in the December 23 date.

LEGISLATURE SCRUTINIZING PRIME MINISTER

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¶3. (C) Critics of Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont scheduled a debate in the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) on October 10 to examine possible ethics violations by the cabinet. Most media attention has focused on Surayud's ownership of national forest land. A member of the NLA

recently downplayed to us the significance of the debate, which will not culminate in a no-confidence vote. Surayud appears under political attack by leading legislator Prasong Soonsiri, one of the strategists involved in the 2006 coup. Prasong is also a public advocate for delaying the House election. One of our contacts speculated that if evidence of ethical lapses on Surayud's part were to surface during the NLA debate, this might make it more difficult for Surayud to be reappointed to the Privy Council after concluding his term as Prime Minister.

NEW POLITICAL PARTIES REMAIN DISORGANIZED

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¶4. (C) The People's Power Party (PPP), whose leader, Samak Sundaravej, has publicly described himself as the "nominee" of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, remains the only newly-prominent political party to present a cohesive public image. Other political parties that disaffected Thai Rak Thai figures and others have tried to form have suffered from severe factionalism and defections. Despite the likelihood of the House election taking place on December 23, it currently is virtually impossible to assess which parties, aside from PPP and the Democrats, might turn in a respectable performance, and which will flop. According to transitional provisions of the 2007 Constitution, politicians do not need to commit to a political party until 30 days before election day.

REVERSAL ON LESE MAJESTE

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¶5. (C) Legislators recently introduced draft legislation to strengthen lese majeste provisions, so as to criminalize

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criticism of a wider range of members of the royal family, Privy Councilors, and other specially-appointed representatives of the monarchy. On October 9, one of the leading proponents of the bill withdrew it, citing opposition expressed privately to him by a member of the Privy Council. The bill was widely seen as an attempt to quash criticism of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, who has been publicly vilified by allies of deposed PM Thaksin. Privy Council opposition to strengthening lese majeste provisions would be consistent with claims months ago that Police officials dropped their investigation of Thaksin for lese majeste charges after unnamed Palace officials allegedly signaled disapproval.

BOYCE